OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

THE KEEPER OF THE LIGHT

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

YES, Monsieur, it is true that our light-house-keeper is an ex-convict," said the curé, lighting the cigar that Slade had handed him. "But then, since he has paid the penalty to the province for the life he took, why should he not atone to God by saving lives? Besides," he added, smiling benignantly, "it is hard for a man to be so very bad here, in Tete des Rochers."

Some girls came up the path that led to his little stone-hewn house, and, excusing himself, the priest led them inside. Slade and I sat smoking upon the stoop, gazing downhill toward the lights of the Gulf hamlet.

"There's some mighty good-looking girls in this God-forsaken corner of the world," said Slade, "but I tell you that old convict's daughter has them all beaten. Did you see the look that chunky French Canadian mill-hand gave me in the store to-night? He's her fiance, it appears, and he's spotted me for a rival. When I think of Marie bestowing herself upon that lout it just makes me sick. It's a crime, that's what it is, and somebody ought to stop it. And if nobody will why——"

Slade broke off abruptly, and I blessed the fortune that left me but two fleet weeks in the year in which to play upon those vagrant fancies that Slade, freed from all need of toil, could indulge perennially.

"We'll hire a boat and row to the lighthouse to-morrow," said Slade. "I want you to take a look at her. I've had quite some talks with her at the store. She wants to leave home and see the world, and fancies it's a sort of magnified and glorified Tete des Rochers. What a life for her, cooped up in that old lighthouse with the old man and her crazy grandfather, or whoever that patriarchal old person is!"

The priest came out again and took up his cigar from the window-ledge, on which he had laid it. He waited till his charges had tripped out of sign down the declivity.

"You wish to go to the lighthouse to-morrow?" he asked. "Pardon me if I overheard you; my windows open behind your heads. And I am quick at hearing," he added, with self-depreciation. "To-morrow I visit my charges there, and, if you like, I will call for you at your hotel in the afternoon. I shall be your boatman, for rowing is my sole exercise until the hunting season begins."

Slade made a grimace at me. "We couldn't refuse," he said, as we strolled down the hill. "But I don't fancy having that priest around. I wonder how much he overheard?"

He called for us on the following day, late in the afternoon, and we pulled out through the slack tide. A gaunt mist shrouded the Gulf, through which the booming of the bell-buoy seemed to diffuse itself in every quarter. On Tete des Rochers, where the long line of the hills plunged into the sucking sea in steep, black cliffs that shored up the edge of a continent, the lighthouse had already begun blinking gayly when we arrived. We grounded upon the reefs and stepped cautiously across the slippery weeds until we reached the little entrance door, where the keeper met us.

He only grunted in answer to the priest's introduction and, turning, led the way up the worn steps of stone until we reached the living-room, half-way to the top, a barely furnished place, austerely devoid of those chromographs and cheap colored prints dear to the French soul. By the fireplace, almost beneath the hollow flue that ascended to the roofs, carrying the smuts and sparks of a new fire, sat a tall old man of great age, who looked up at us, blinking and mumbling, but said nothing nor rose.

"He never speaks," the priest explained. "But it is thought he understands."

But the girl: Slade had not over-appreciated her. She had the black Breton hair so common among the Canadian descendants of those first voyageurs, tinted with gleams of bronze; in her blue eyes surprise and joy struggled with discontent and conquered it. And now a latent fear, of whose presence in my mind I had been but dimly conscious through the day, leaped in my heart. I felt the interplay of secret antagonisms among those three: between the girl, in whose timid handclasp I seemed to read a secret understanding, and the father, standing at the door; between the man and the man. At the hearth the graybeard, inscrutable and ever silent, yet appeared to play some part in an unfolding drama; and over all brooded the benign, keen spirit of the priest in his black robe.

Even as the father turned for one instant away I saw the girl's face change and her lips move in low, impassioned speech. Slade whispered something and her eyes flashed prettily in a half-childish anger. Then the father came back, and it was as though the curtain fell upon a drama.

"Come, Marie," he said, harshly. "Our oil runs low; we must carry up more."

Rebellion flashed out from her eyes frankly. Then, with supple adroitness, the priest had interposed himself between the girl and Slade. I do not think he spoke; I saw the seams of the cassock start as he bent and little folds of cloth run rippling across his back; then the door closed and we three men were alone, and the graybeard beside the fire, who never moved.

"The old man thinks I'm so good," said Slade, his face flushed in humiliation at the priest's dexterous rebuke. "If he had any sense he'd never try to hitch her to that pudding-headed mill-hand. Why, the girl hates him! If he'd be a little less harsh with her and trust her . . . that's the way with widowers; they want to be father and mother rolled into one."

The priest came back from the fire; I believe he had been whispering to the graybeard. "Ah," he said, "I overheard you again. What should a man do with such sharp ears?" he continued, humorously. "Now, my friend, I heard you misjudging that fine man down-stairs. Perhaps if you heard his story——"

I cannot reproduce his words, with their quaint accentuation, the stumbling idioms, and the strong phrases struck from the man's enkindling anger and sense of stern justice; nor the scene in the dork room, with the bell-buoy booming below and the figure of the graybeard only a blur against the spears of the fire. But it was substantially this:

Twenty years before a new yacht lay in the little bay. Its owner was the son of a rich man, a millionaire even in those days, before wealth had heaped up new fortunes for its possessors. Tete des Rochers was then substantially the same as now, save that the cottages did not extend so far along the bluff, and the salmon swarmed in June up the Black River, where now the logs of the lumber-mill float in the dam. The yacht was anchored off the small pier; its owner spent each day ashore, fishing. Sometimes, when he was tired of the sport, he passed his days on the stoop of the house of the village postmistress, whose husband acted as his guide.

I pictured the scene at evening: girls strolling arm in arm along the pier, to see the yacht once more and exchange words with the sailors; a little group jesting with one who walked alone, then, seeing a young man approach her, making off, calling back:

"Run, Lisette. Here comes Pierre. If he should catch you you cannot escape him."

Envious were the glances that some cast back at him, for Pierre Desmoulins with his fine figure and handsome face, could have won many a girl in Tete des Rochers in place of Lisette Tremblay, the daughter of the postmistress, though he was one of the life-boat crew and the death of his father in the maw of the sea foreshadowed his own.

Pierre caught the girl by the arm and linked his own through hers. Thus they passed onward toward the pier, he chattering volubly at times and again silent, she always silent. Gradually, before the girl's indifference, Pierre's speech died away.

They stood at the pier's end, side by side, their arms no longer linked. A tourist boat had cast anchor, and her passengers thronged the decks, staring at the fisher-girls, pitying their lonely lives.

"How happy they are, those people," murmured Lisette, enviously.

"Oh, some are happy and some are not," responded Pierre, sagely. "But they conceal their sorrows—as we do."

"But they are free and they can go where they will," said the girl. "They are going—to Gaspe," she said, with indrawn breath.

Pierre turned and looked at her.

"When we are married you will not want to roam," he replied, linking his arm through hers again.

But she detached herself and stood gazing hard to sea, watching the gulls' flight into the gray shadows that crept over the waves. The steamship had cast off, and was already beginning to recede into the twilight. The opposite shore had vanished in the night mists, and out of the depths the vessel, alight from stern to bow, blazed like a galaxy of stars.

And he, too, would soon go thus, into that outer world—the young yachtsman who had first taught her that she was lonely.

A voice hailed her, pitched just so as to reach her ears. She started and glanced toward the yacht. Pierre was talking to the harbor-master and did not see. A man was beckoning to her from the bow—she knew him: Mark Frere, who ran cargoes of contraband from Baie du Loup opposite, a man of sinister reputation among the coast folks. She saw him laugh, and his voice accentuated the horror of the lonely shore. The incoming tide, turning the brackish water salt, began suddenly to lap the rocks and send up little ripples of spray. Next moment Pierre came back; he had observed nothing.

"You are sad, Lisette," he said. "But when we are married you will forget. Perhaps—"

He could not continue, for the shadow that oppressed her seemed to fall upon him also; it was the loneliness of men who strive against the mighty forces of the hills and the sea.

She watched him in terror. Always that marriage. Would he never cease talking of it? More silent than before they retraced their steps toward the cluster of log houses under the pine-topped cliffs.

Later that night, while Lisette hemmed her wedding clothes in the kitchen, Pierre talked with her mother, the old postmistress, and the unheeded telegraph clicked out its messages from village to village along the shore. The girl caught fragments of messages that came out of the void, through miles of emptiness. Suddenly HO HO ticked out. It was the call for Gaspé.

Gaspé, the ultimate port on the gray shores of the St. Lawrence, seemed the end of the world to her. And the yacht was going to Gaspé; going soon, going soon. The telegraph sang the words to her: soon, soon, soon, soon.

The old woman, having heard Pierre's story, laid her knitting aside and called.

"Lisette, come here!" she cried.

The girl came slowly in, her fingers picking at the garment that she held.

"Pierre complains that you want to postpone the wedding again," she grumbled. "Why are you so foolish, child? If you don't take care you will lose him. He is not a man to be trifled with. Has not the curé talked with you?"

She scolded her, while her father, the half-witted man who guided the yachtsman, strolled in, chuckling and rubbing his hands.

"Jean," cried the mother, turning to him, "here is this daughter of yours again postponing her wedding with Pierre."

"Ha! I knew it!" cried the old man, shaking his pipe at her. "She is a wild thing—she is a little salmon. She wants to go to sea like the salmon, eh?"

"She wants to travel to Gaspé and the good Father knows where," cried Pierre in exasperation. "Are not all places the same?"

"I knew it," cried the father, again. "There lies a salmon stranded upon the rocks hard by the river's mouth. When I saw him this morning I said to him, 'Thus it is with the daughter, my fine fellow. She, too, wants to go seaward. And by the by she comes home, gasping out of the salt sea, as you gasp for the clean, fresh river water.' He, too, was content—no, he must see the ocean and taste its salty tides. Ah, but he is glad to come home again, his sides quivering and the look of a homeless man in his eyes." He turned to his daughter. "The salmon are like the tourists," he said. "They come and go as God wills; but we are here—we are the people."

"Cease your folly," the mother scolded. "Tell her she must not provoke Pierre any longer. If she will not heed the curé, whom will she heed?"

Pierre leaned forward, flushed and excited. "Meester Blakes—lee, she will heed him," he said. "He shall talk to her. He has seen all the world from the deck of his yacht."

"Come with me—come now," he prayed.

Lisette saw the stranded fish upon the rocks next day and recalled her father's words. Was that a symbol of her own life? Had it attained its freedom in the great sea, only to return to the waters of its home, urged on by irresistible forces, shuddering out of the vast tides, with straining flanks and gasping mouth, mad for its home?

But he left for Gaspé to-morrow! She sank down upon the shore; the thought was stunning. Suddenly a shadow fell across her path. She looked up; Mark Frere stood at her side, smiling evilly. And she was at the foot of the wharf, ten yards from where his boat lay moored. Five steps up from the sand, ten strides, and one was aboard. Why had she gone thither?

That was what Mark Frere asked her. "Do you not work with the other girls?" he asked. "What are you dreaming of?"

She saw his black eyes bent upon her, and, stammering for words, as one asleep, she said:

"I want to see Gaspé."

"I'll take you to Gaspé," he cried. "See the good little boat. At once we run down with the tide. Then to-morrow we shall return. Ah, the good little boat, you should see how she cuts through the waves."

"You will—take me to Gaspé?" cried Lisette, her eyes open wide in fear and astonishment.

"Just for a little run—then back. Nobody will see you come aboard."

"Wait, then. I must tell Maman."

"No, no. Come now."

He swung her up from the sands to the pier and led her to the edge. One spring, and they were aboard. A boy began hoisting the sails; they flapped to the breeze, and all at once the anchor was up and the pier began to recede.

"I will not go with you," she cried. "Set me ashore."

The boy looked up and grinned. Mark leered evilly and twirled his black mustache.

"Let me go!" cried the girl, striking at him. "I hate you."

Mark stepped aside and bowed. "There is somebody below whom you may like better," he snickered.

The cure paused and glanced toward the form of the graybeard by the fire. He had not stirred. Slade and I waited in silence. Presently the priest resumed his story.

"Sooner or later," the fishermen say, "the sea tells all its secrets."

But Pierre Desmoulins did not always brood by the tides. He paced the shores incessantly, insatiably questioning the seafaring men in all the hamlets of the Gulf shores. Always he prayed to the Virgin that he might find her living and lead her home. Soon his lonely figure became a sight well known among the fisher-folk. It was during the following summer that the old lighthouse-keeper made a proposition to him.

"You must not grieve all your life for her," he said. "I am growing old; soon the earth will receive my bones. Come, take my place, and I will teach you how to keep the light burning after I am gone. Presently the sea will heal you."

Pierre thanked him. "Perhaps, some time," he said. "But not till I have abandoned hope." He continued his searching. It was easily learned that she had gone with Mark Frere aboard the yacht—but beyond that no one knew anything.

Once Pierre went across the Gulf to Baie du Loup. But all he could learn there was that Mark Frere had disappeared, abandoning his wife and child. He heard of Frere at Tadousac and, obtaining absence from the lifeboat crew, went thither. Frere had put into Tadousac the preceding spring, they told him, in a small fishing-boat; but he had no woman with him.

"She will come when the salmon come," babbled the old guide, rubbing his hands and chuckling in the spring sunshine. The postmistress never spoke of her. Such little tragedies were common enough in the Gulf villages. They must be borne uncomplainingly. But Pierre did not forget.

One day the mother said: "You ought to take a wife, Pierre. You should not always grieve for her. It is not natural for a young man to grieve forever for one woman."

The guide came in and took down his fishing-rod. "I must give you a drink of oil, my fine fellow," he muttered. "Soon the salmon will come, and then the tourists."

They hoped that this summer would bring the yachtsman to port. Perhaps he could tell something about the mystery. He must have known that Lisette was not betrothed to Mark.

"If we had asked him sooner," said Pierre, "he would have given her advice and she would have heeded him. Ah, he was a fine man," he continued, kindled into transitory enthusiasm by the remembrance of his friend.

"He caught the big fish in the pool," said the old guide.

But suddenly, unexpectedly, Pierre discovered something. He had wandered to St. Joseph, seven miles along the shore. There were some fishing-boats in the bay. Gazing at them idly, he saw Mark Frere bending over his catch.

Pierre crept back from the sands. He knew the ship would put out on the incoming tide; knew that Mark would land the next day at Ste. Anne de Quiberon. All that night he strode through the rain, breasting the mountain roads; and at noon he found his enemy. Mark Frere was coming out of an inn, wiping his mouth upon his sleeve. He saw Pierre, stopped, and squinted at him. Instantly Pierre was at his throat.

"Tell me what you have done with her before I kill you," he cried.

"I don't know where she is," gasped Mark.

"You lie," roared Pierre. "Where did she go?"

Mark began to tremble. "She did not go with me, I swear," he cried. "I know nothing of her. I was his duck-decoy."

Pierre shook. "Whose?" he muttered.

"Meester Blakes—lee's," he answered, picking himself up. "He took her to Quebec, I suppose—that's where his boat lies up in winter."

"Where does he live?" Pierre cried.

"Rue Louis Quinze, 429," said Mark, grinning as he slipped away.

Pierre made no effort to detain the smuggler. He went to Quebec and found the street, followed it down from the citadel to the Lower Town, through obscure alleys, past shuttered houses with evil atmospheres; at last he halted before 429. It was a seamen's tavern. In the back room sailors were drinking with women of the Lower Town.

Pierre saw Lisette.

There was a flurry and scramble in the room as the inmates saw a tall man dressed in fisherman's clothes leap into their midst. The woman screamed and sprang for a door. Pierre followed her through a short corridor, into an empty court, under the stars. He caught at her gown and fell prone to the ground, cursing and weeping, while she, dumb with terror, huddled against a wall.

Presently he began to plead. "Come with me—come now," he prayed. "All are waiting for you. We will be married in the little church. I shall not ask you anything. Come!

"I have not seen your face," he wept. "You shall come to-morrow; listen! You shall come in the dark. Winter is near; the white snows will hide everything—all memories. Nothing will be seen but the tops of the pines and the true little light that flashes over the sea. We will live there. Come with me!"

She never spoke; yet he knew that he might as well have prayed to the sky. At last he rose.

"I shall always wait for you," he said. "I shall go to the lighthouse. And every night its glow will be a beacon of welcome, calling to you across the evil things of the dark."

When he went into the street the day was breaking. He made his way instinctively toward the harbor. In front of him a yacht lay at anchor, brave with brasses and paint. As he approached her he heard footsteps behind him, turned and looked into the face of the yachtsman, staggering back from some night revelry ashore. The latter halted and clapped him on the back drunkenly.

"I know you, Jean," he cried, thickly. "Where have we met?"

Pierre felt in his sleeve. "Don't you remember me?" he asked, and plunged a knife into his breast.

"Yes, they pardoned him after he had served one year," said the cure. "He came straight back to Tete des Rochers, and he never spoke of her afterward. By and by we got him the charge of the lighthouse, and ever since—that must be nineteen years—he has been here."

"But the woman?"

"She came back two years afterward," the cure answered. "I saw the flash of distress from the lighthouse and hurried down the hill. It was the middle of winter; ice choked the Gulf and a hurricane was driving the pelting snows across the land. But a priest is like a doctor; he cannot wait till the sun comes out. I found a boat above the waterline and dragged it down to the sea, entered, and pulled for the point through the thick floes. A shattered boat lay on the reef—just a common little open boat, such as the tourists use in fine weather. Inside a woman crouched, shielding a bundle in her arms, and Pierre knelt at her side. I had just time to hear her and to give her the Sacrament.

"With her two hands, unused to labor, she had pulled that tiny craft clear over the Gulf through the blizzard, her only guide the steady beason gleam on Tete des Rochers. But she was flying from sin, Messieurs, and her heart told her that God works through the darkness. She had stripped half to the skin; but she saved the child."

Suddenly the graybeard rose and came toward us from the fire, his arms stretched out in front of him, as though he groped through the fogs of his mind. "She had a salmon's eyes!" he cried. "She had a salmon's eyes!"

The cure went forward and supported him, led him back to his chair, and, stooping, threw some more fagots upon the embers. Then he came back to Slade.

"So perhaps you understand why that fine man is harsh with the girl," he said. "He knows that it is lonely in Tete des Rochers; he knows the tug at her heart and the wild things that clamor in her mind. It is natural that the young should be in love with life and that they should hunger for experiences." He addressed Slade only, and his voice seemed to fill the chamber, re-echoing the solemn call of the bell-buoy without. "But whoso offends against one of these innocent ones, it were better for him that a millstone were put about his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea."

Slade placed his hand upon my arm. "Let's go," he said.

But he said afterward that, with Saul, he had been bowed before a blinding light which seemed to encompass him, playing its fierce rays upon his soul, so that the necessity of righteousness lay like dividing steel between his purpose and its accomplishment.